

[Transcript] The News Agents / How many suspected spies are there in the UK?

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

There's a little bit of James Bond, Spooks, John Le Carré, to today's episode of The News Agents, with the news that three suspected Russian spies have been arrested in the UK.

They haven't been arrested today.

It's just the disclosure of their arrest has come today from the BBC.

They were put in prison back in February of this year, but it's only now that we've learnt about them.

So who are they?

What were they doing?

How long have they been here?

Are they the tip of an iceberg?

Is there a much wider network of Russian spies operating almost freely in the UK?

And should we expect more to come?

Welcome to The News Agents.

The News Agents

It's John, and in the absence of any other news agents, we've got a proper former agent today, the former head of the Russian desk at MI6, who's going to take us through what is going on in London with the disclosure of these arrests.

We're also going to be looking at Afghanistan two years on since the Taliban came back to power and what that means for women and young girls.

But we start with the murky news that three suspected Russian spies are now in detention.

Now, we are used to hearing about Russian diplomats having been expelled from London because of undiplomatic behaviour, quote, unquote.

We're also used to British diplomats being kicked out of Russia because they have engaged in activities that the Russian state would say were incompatible with their position there as foreign office representatives.

What is exceptionally rare is hearing that people who have been living in plain sight, integrated into British society, actually turn out to be agents of the Russian state.

But that's what we're being told today from the BBC with this disclosure.

The three people concerned are all in Rusev, who's 45 and apparently was living in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, that great centre of espionage and spy activity.

The other two apparently were living as a couple, a guy called Jean Bazoff, who was 41 and a harrow in Northwest London, and his partner, Katrin Ivanova, 31.

And apparently they lived as a couple and were lovely and they delivered cakes to friends who live nearby and sometimes pies.

And should we be surprised that Russian spies are operating in London when so many wealthy Russians have come to the UK because they believe there is no better place in the world to launder their money?

And of course, with the situation in Ukraine, Russian activity will have intensified because of Britain leading opposition to Russia's egregious invasion of a sovereign country.

Bill Browder is the chief executive of Hermitage Capital Management.

If that sounds dran-dusty, he was operating in Russia and sought to expose corruption and malfeasance from the Russian state of which Vladimir Putin was the head.

And you can imagine how that went down with Vladimir Putin.

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And Bill Browder is now living in London, but has been a target of the Russian state himself. Well, first of all, if it's true, it doesn't surprise me at all.

The Russians have a very, very well-established program of spying on every adversary.

I suspect that it's the tip of a much bigger iceberg.

The UK has been a very lenient, open country for Russia for a long time.

The focus has always been on Islamic terrorism as opposed to Russian malfeasance.

I would imagine that as time goes on, we'll find out more and more people will get rounded up in these types of investigations.

And I think it's a wake-up call.

As I said, I think there's many more than just three, and I think that there needs to be a lot of resources allocated towards what Putin is up to in the UK because we are really an open target for him, and there's a lot of bad things that these people can do.

Well, that was Bill Browder, and listening to that with me in the newsagents' studio is Christopher Steele, former head of MI6's Russian Desk.

And if the name feels familiar, he also wrote a dossier on Donald Trump, which has caused a little bit of controversy, I think, for the whole four years that I was in the U.S. of A, but we're not going to talk about Donald Trump tempting though that is.

Chris Steele, welcome to you. Thanks so much for coming in.

When you hear Bill Browder say the British state needs to commit serious resources to this, do you think it will be increasing the resources?

I think so. I mean, we went through a period after 9-11 when the actual percentage of intelligence resource deployed on Russia and China and other state actors fell into single-figure percentages, and that was clearly a big mistake.

And the problem is it takes probably a generation to rebuild the capability needed to deal with the challenges that we're facing now. And there's been a brain drain, for example, of people out of the government who were experts in this area, and we're quite exposed, I think, to this sort of threat.

I was trying to think the last time I heard that spies integrated in British society had been picked up under the Official Secrets Act and put in prison.

Yeah, diplomats being kicked out because they were kind of not really the military attache or commercial attache or whatever it was they said, but were doing intelligence work.

This seems to me pretty unusual.

It's not unusual in terms of Soviet and Russian intelligence work, because this goes right back to the revolution in effect.

After the revolution, the Soviet state as it was didn't have diplomatic relations with many major countries. It wasn't recognized.

So the only way they could operate their sort of intelligence gathering function was to send their officers abroad under false identities to integrate into those societies, often Russian emigrates, for example, in Paris back in the day.

How much of your work at MI6 and MI5, because this will be MI5 as well, wouldn't it, is spent watching people like this? Because it sounds like these people have been on the radar for quite some time.

It's very difficult to track this sort of threat, because of course it's like looking for needles in a haystack. Effectively, you have people coming into the country,

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and this is a very cosmopolitan country which has a lot of immigration, coming in with false identities of non-Russian countries, as in this case, and it's extremely difficult to track, short of having a tip-off or a lead from a source. Very difficult, and of course this type of operation was organized under the old directorate S of the KGB. Many of these cases have been going on for decades, people have been trained up, they've been deployed, and even in this case, it appears that at least some of them have been here for 10 or 15 years. And how is the state able to track this? Because even if you know that people are there, it must take enormous amounts of human effort to keep an eye on what they're doing and who they're interacting with and where they're going. Yeah, they've got to make either a bad mistake, basically, or there's got to be a tip-off or a lead from a source in Moscow that this is what we should be looking out for. And it's early days yet with this case in terms of what evidence there is, what got the authorities onto them. In this case, you know, with the legal's operations, it is very, very difficult despite whatever resources you deploy. As I've said, there's a Russian community in London of around a hundred thousand. I mean, keeping a track on that's pretty not impossible. And then you've got all this stuff coming in from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, Bulgaria in this particular case. And of course, Bulgaria was a member of the EU. So once you're in as a Bulgarian citizen, whether you are actually Bulgarian or not, you suddenly open up this whole vista of rights and abilities to get hold of documentation and to move about and to cultivate people and to do things under the radar screen. Do you think the principal purpose of these people is to spy on the British state and what it's doing and what its nuclear capabilities are or whatever it happens to be? Or are they here to spy on Russians who may be causing trouble and may be a threat to the leadership in Moscow? Traditionally, the illegals directorate would be seeking to plant people in as long term sleeper agents, particularly to be activated in times of crisis or war where, for example, the embassy was closed and all the diplomats were expelled, which was a conceivable situation in the Cold War. It may be that this has been modified slightly now in terms of its objectives. I mean, it's not quite the sort of all bells and whistles operation that we saw in the Cold War, something like, you remember the Americans from the US television series, that kind of scenario where people are trained for years, they're deployed and they're very carefully sort of nurtured over decades, in fact, may not be quite what's going on here now. Then we may be looking at a sort of illegals light type operation where people have half the training, whether they only have half the identity protection. But because our society's become so cosmopolitan and people move about so much, they could be doing any number of multiple tasks. They could be running agents, they could be, as you say, keeping an eye on emigres. One of these guys was living in Great Yarmouth, which is a fairly perplexing situation, and the others were all in London. And the jobs that they had were pretty mundane. So I don't sense that they were seeking to actually get themselves into the sort of key areas, but they must have been tasked on other things which are not yet clear. I suppose the risk from your point of view, from the British spy networks point of view, is if you arrest them, are you in danger of revealing who your source is, maybe in Moscow, who is giving you information like this? Because there is good human intelligence. I mean,

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the Iraq war, the human intelligence was crap. But with Russia, there has been a long tradition of the British having penetrated areas of the Russian state. Is that a fair comment?

I think we at times have had very significant penetrations of the Russian state. And of course, intelligence work and intelligence services change quite slowly. So even something like the defection of Gordievsky in the 1980s will still have a resonance now in terms of the history and the traditions and the culture of Russian intelligence as it now is. And of course, the other thing that's important to remember is that Russia is run now by former intelligence officers in almost every aspect of Russian life, whether it's banking or insurance or the energy sector or the government itself. This is the dominant culture. This is the mentality. This is the psychology we have to understand. It's a priority for them to have good intelligence and to spend resource on trying to penetrate our society. We saw the case of what happened with the Scrippals, a former Russian spy, and the use of Novichok with such devastating consequences. Are you concerned there could be other sleeper spies in the UK with stocks of dangerous chemical or biological weapons that could do the same sort of thing? I think it's very possible.

I think that, yes, I even think the Scrippal operation, it's quite possible that people like this were used as facilitators or careers. It's not entirely clear where the Novichok came in, when it was taken to, how much was around and so on. Coming out of the embassy, the Russians are perfectly aware that their officers under diplomatic cover in the embassy here are subject to quite significant observation and surveillance. For the really dangerous, risky operations, they may well use people like this who have so far remained below the radar screen. And so they live this normal life until such times as the Russian state deems it expedient to activate them? Yes, exactly. And are we doing that?

There's never been a history, really, in Western intelligence of running these so-called illegal operations. By its very nature, Russian society and, say, Chinese society is very difficult to work like that in, because it's not a cosmopolitan, it's not an open liberal type of society. So I think we are much more vulnerable to that. And it's certainly a very significant tradition, as I say, in terms of Soviet and Russian intelligence operations.

I also thought it was fascinating to learn, according to the BBC, that these people were arrested and put in prison or remand or whatever in February. And only now, in August, do we learn about it? I mean, it shows that the Official Secrets Act is still quite powerful. Yes, I don't know whether there was a denotice issued. I don't know why it's come out. A denotice is when the government can slap something on the broadcasters and say, you cannot report this. They can attempt to slap on the broadcasters.

Yes. So whether there was a denotice, I don't know. Obviously, it is a while since the arrests and the indictments were made.

Do you think that the British intelligence services have been compliant in getting this information out there? Because presumably, the BBC wouldn't broadcast it if MI6 or MI5 were saying, you absolutely cannot report this. There's always a debate about these things.

I don't know whether you've ever been on the other end of this. I've been on one end of it, you may have been on the other. I have once or twice been on the other end of it.

And the denotice system still exists. And I heard the other day that it had been used in a particular case. So I think there would have been some kind of negotiation gone on. The government may have requested that this wasn't made public until a particular time, for some reason. A final thought. Do you think there are dozens, maybe hundreds,

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of sleeper agents from Russia, maybe China as well, who knows where else, living normal lives in the UK, waiting to be activated at a moment's notice? I certainly think there are probably a couple of dozen. I mean, I don't think there are hundreds. This is a hugely resource-intensive work for the Russians to carry out, the training, the deployment, everything that goes into it. What was interesting in this case, though, is there was very clearly a role they were playing in obtaining European documentation, identity documents, passports, driving licenses and things like that. But we will learn a lot more, I think, as this case unfolds and is brought to court.

Christopher Seale, thank you so much. Thank you.

And in a moment, we'll be talking about Afghanistan. Two years on from the US withdrawal and the takeover again of the Taliban and what that has done for women in Afghanistan.

Short answer, not a lot. We'll be talking to Yalda Hakim, my former BBC colleague, about the situation as it is today and the work of a foundation she has set up to help young women continue their education overseas.

This is The Newsagents.

Welcome back. Two years ago today, the Taliban moved back into Kabul. There was no resistance. What resistance there had been had quickly drifted away and they were back in control of the country. 22 years ago, almost to the day, I was in Afghanistan, Northern Afghanistan, having got in via Tajikistan and was moving with a front line as the Northern Alliance forces backed by the US and Britain were trying to expel the Taliban from the country.

And of course, Kabul did fall and a Western supporting government was installed in Kabul.

I was in a place called Talakan. It had just fallen from Taliban control and the Northern Alliance and a number of us journalists moved in. And one of the striking things in that town was that there was a girl's school that had been abandoned by the Taliban, but it hadn't been used as a girl's school. It had been used as a weapons store.

It was full of Russian-made Khutusha rockets that the Taliban had been using to try to resist the onslaught. And it was a kind of perfect metaphor that girls weren't being taught, but the Taliban were using it to store arms. So we're going to do a brief history now of the past 22 years of Afghanistan with some familiar voices, maybe.

The first strike against terrorism is a missile barrage lands on Afghanistan.

We will not falter and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail.

Taliban claims Osama bin Laden was unhurt in the raids and the world waits for the next move.

The road behind me has been a no man's land between the Taliban and Northern Alliance front lines, but American bombing has changed that. Suddenly, the Northern Alliance feel confident enough to push down this road towards the Taliban positions. Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda. I concluded that it's time to end America's longest war.

It's time for American troops to come home. Kabul is not right now in an imminent threat environment. I think it's a procession of of the Taliban. Yes, it is. There's the white flag.

They're coming down the street. The Taliban aren't just in Kabul, but they're actually right right in the center of it. They've just have just walked past the presidential palace.

The Taliban has returned to power. The militant group took over the country's capital this weekend. Afghans are thronging to Kabul's airport, desperate to get on planes and leave the country at any cost. The United Nations says Afghanistan's hunger crisis is called pure catastrophe.

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About 25 million Afghans are living in poverty. This week marks 400 days since the Taliban have banned Afghan girls over the age of 12 from going to school. Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls are forbidden from attending school because of their gender. And the voice you heard at the end there was Yalda Hakim, my former colleague at the BBC, who has reported brilliantly from that country and has set up a foundation to help young women get an education. And she is about to join Sky News as the presenter of World News on that channel. Yalda, it's great to talk to you. Thanks so much for doing this. How bad are things for girls and women? I heard a Taliban spokesman hang on the radio this morning saying, oh no, women are playing a prominent role in health services and education and other areas of public life as well. John, they'll say that. And really, that is all part of the Taliban's broken promises. I remember in that first week when they swept to power and we saw their first press conference, these shadowy images that had operated in the dead of night and through terrorist attacks across the country over almost 20 years had emerged. And they were now holding a press conference in the presidential palace. And these names that we've heard of over 20 years suddenly emerged and we saw their faces. And within that press conference, the main guy, the main spokesperson, Zabylan Mujahed, he spoke about women's rights. He spoke about human rights. And he said that we will be allowing girls and women to attend school. They'll be part of the workforce. They'll be part of society. This is not the 90s. We are not going back to what we were in the 90s. We've learned our lessons. And this is a very different Taliban. And the world in many ways, John, believes them. We described them as Taliban 2.0. And I suppose there was hope against hope from the Afghan people inside the country who'd been abandoned by the leadership, who'd been abandoned by the international community, who felt abandoned and betrayed by the West, especially America. Suddenly all they had left was the Taliban. And so they hoped that this would be different. And yet today marks 694 days since the Taliban have banned girls from school and have banned women from going to university, have closed salons across the country, have prevented women from traveling without a chaperone across the country. Things like women taking their children to public parks. I, as a mother, can't imagine what else I would do on a Saturday afternoon than to take my child to a playground. This is now forbidden and denied to Afghan mothers and women across the country. They're not allowed to go out to parks. I've heard Taliban leaders that I've interviewed say to me, what is the reason for them to leave their homes? Why do they need to work? Why do they need to leave their homes when a man can provide for them? So we have come full circle in the last two years, but really the last 20 years, everything that the West had promised this country and everything that the younger generation had worked towards has vanished. It's such a depressing picture. I know you have set up this foundation. Just tell us a word or two about what you are doing with it and the successes you're having. The foundation was part of the evacuation. Like so many other people, including journalists and people who had the means and the contacts to evacuate people out of the country, I was getting frantic calls from a handful of young women who were going to the American University of Afghanistan. My foundation was supporting them through their education for a number of years. They were calling me desperate saying, we are burning our documents. We are burying documents. We are not texting each other in English anymore. We are so afraid of the Taliban arriving because

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they'd heard all sorts of rumors that young Taliban men who were coming into the city were going to try and marry as many young women as possible. So these young girls were terrified and they were calling me saying, please get us out of this country. So we began an evacuation which started with five young women from Afghanistan, 18, 19, 20 years old, and ended up being over 800 people. And we got several plain loads of Afghan, mostly young women and activists, MPs, journalists, journalists from other networks, journalists who were working as stringers for various other publications, global publications, including the BBC, out via Qatar into Albania. And many of them now are on full page scholarships in the United States. We have 250 scholarships across the US now at universities like the University of Texas, like Dartmouth, like Bard, like Brown, you know, they're fully funded and they are really the hope for many of their families who remain in Afghanistan

because things, as you say, are so dark for so many. I remember an interview you did with the conservative MP Tobias Elwood where he was saying things have got so much better under the Taliban

and you pushed back pretty damn hard. And I think he probably assumed that he was talking to someone

who didn't really know the subject very well and then found you knew the subject very much better than he did. We can just play a clip of it. In terms of violence, there are other people who say that the Taliban is still inflicting violence upon them. Yeah, have you visited yourself?

I really encourage people to make their own judgment. Absolutely. I've been to Helmand, I've been to Kandahar, I've been to Harat, I've spent time in Kabul. Where did you go?

I was there in February of this year. Right. Well, if you go, what I experienced today, I could not travel. It was simply impossible. And nor could I, but you were escorted by the Taliban across the country. So obviously you saw things from their perspective. I was free to move.

I was not escorted across the country in that way. I was not escorted by the Taliban, as you say. There's an interesting point to be raised from that exchange with Tobias Elwood, which is, to what extent should the West engage? Should the British reopen an embassy in Kabul and try to persuade the Taliban that actually what they promised when they came back in two years ago should be adhered to, there should be rights for women. And maybe by staying away, you're making things worse. I think what we have here is a society that works for men.

So if a Tobias Elwood enters the country and could determine whether the embassy reopens and rolls out the red carpet and takes him on tours, I think it could be a great country.

But for the 18 or so million Afghan women and girls who are locked inside their homes and they can't travel across the country, they can't move around freely, it is prison. And they feel completely abandoned and betrayed by the promises of the West. So I'm not sure if embassies should

be reopened. I'm not sure if there should be engagement. But what I do know is that there is a humanitarian crisis in the country that is about to get worse, continues to get worse every winter. We hear of children freezing to death. We hear of people left isolated in remote parts of the country cut off from the outside world and scores of people completely freezing and dying of hunger and malnutrition and poverty and all that still continues in the country. So the international

community, I suppose, on the one hand probably feels a sense of responsibility because they were engaged there for 20 years. They did pour billions of dollars into the country. They did create

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infrastructure. So what to do with a problem like Afghanistan? And what to do with an issue like the Taliban, where they also are dealing with ISK, the so-called Islamic state that are operating in the country, that are also sworn enemies of the Taliban, which could also be a problem for the West. We have a number of issues here and I guess the likes of Tobias Elwood were trying to figure out how and what to do with Afghanistan and how to deal with it. It's just about not being gullible about the realities of the situation there and engaging with the people who are saying, look, we want to be heard. The Afghan women and girls continue bravely to come out onto

the streets to protest. They want to be heard. It's just a matter of how then that engagement should take place. Yalda Hekim, grateful to you and keep up the good work with your foundation. Thank you so much. Thank you, John. Thank you. In a moment, we'll be talking Donald Trump and why

laws designed to crack down on the mafia are now being used against the former president. This is the news agents.

Welcome back. Now, when I lived in Washington, I had steel plates inserted in my mouth to stop my jaw from dropping at the latest thing that Donald Trump had done. Well, those steel plates aren't working because my jaw dropped again this morning when I saw the range of charges that Donald Trump

was now facing. If you're keeping a running total, it is now 91 criminal charges that Donald Trump is facing from these four indictments. Now, that is 91 more than the combined total of every previous president because no previous president has faced criminal charges. And what is unique about what has happened in Georgia overnight? Charges came just before midnight. So the midnight

pain from Georgia or anyone. Anyway, bad jokes aside, they used RICO laws, the Racketeer Influence

and Corruption Organizations Act. So legislation that was passed to thwart the mafia are now being used against Donald Trump. And not just Donald Trump, 18 other people. And this is why potentially this is really dangerous for him. Because Donald Trump is essentially being charged with being the head of a criminal organization. And lower down the food chain, there are all sorts of people who've been caught up in this, who probably scarcely knew what they were doing, who were facing very

serious charges. And I'm sure prosecutors are hoping to use the mafia language to flip them, to get them to become witnesses for the prosecution. And in other words, turn on Donald Trump. And that presents one danger. The other danger for Donald Trump is that these are state, not federal charges. And what does that mean? It means that Donald Trump, if he wins the next presidential election, can't suddenly say, I pardon you. With regards to charges that have been brought by the Justice Department, in other words, federal charges, he theoretically can pardon himself and pardon those other 18 co-accused at the same time. But because these are state laws, he can't. And therefore, he can't just say to the other 18, stay solid, don't flip, don't be a dirty rat, stay with me, because he has no power there. And that makes him very vulnerable indeed. And potentially, these charges are the most serious that he faces. We're going to have a lot more on this on Newsagents USA, which you can hear exclusively tonight on Global Player.